

# IBDIS

We know

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# NOTES ON YOUR SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE

ALISON ESPACH



PHOENIX

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books

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You disappeared on a school night. Nobody was more surprised by this than me. If I believed in anything when I was thirteen, I believed in the promise of school nights. I believed in the sacred ritual of homework, then dinner, and then the laying out of our clothes for the next morning—something Mom insisted on from the very beginning.

Mom said it was important to wake up having made the decision about what to wear. So, each night, we made the decision. We brushed our teeth. We stared at each other in the mirror as the foam built and built in our mouths, and eventually one of us would speak. “Hello,” you’d say, and this would be so funny for some reason that I can’t understand now. You would start laughing, a loud burst of confetti out your mouth—and so I would start laughing, an ugly inward sucking sound that always made Mom run into a room and say, “Sally, are you okay?” which made us laugh even harder.

“She’s just laughing, Mom,” you said.

We got into our beds. We stared up at the glow-in-the-dark stars that were arranged on the ceiling to spell our names—an idea I hadn’t liked at first, since I wanted the ceiling to be an accurate reflection of the sky. But you said that was impossible. You said, the ceiling will never be the sky, Sally, and I didn’t argue, because no matter how old I became, you were always three years older than me. You always

knew things I didn't know, like there are eighty-eight constellations in the sky and only twenty-two stars in the pack. Just enough to spell our names. So we stuck the stars to the ceiling, and I spent the rest of my childhood looking up, listening to KATHY tell SALLY about all the other things she knew: The sky isn't actually blue. The rain evaporates and goes back up to the sky.

"And did you know that trees can feel pain?" you asked.

"No," I said.

But I wasn't surprised. I had suspected as much ever since Dad told us that the maple tree outside our bedroom window was nearly dead. It was so old, Dad said, it might have been planted by an actual Puritan, a fact that did not impress me as much as it scared me. The tree sat on our lawn, hunched and tangled, and I didn't like looking at it the way I didn't like seeing the bone spurs on Dad's feet when he took his socks off at the beach. Or the bottom row of yellow teeth that were only visible when Mom laughed really hard. It was death, I knew, waiting in the most unexpected places—inside Mom's laughter, at the end of Dad's toes, in the bright green leaves outside our bedroom window that couldn't have looked more alive. So I pulled down the window shade each night before I crawled into your bed. You never pushed me away then. You liked feeling the soft tips of my fingers braiding a strand of your hair.

"Well, they can. That's what Billy Barnes told me," you said. "He knows things like that. His dad's a florist."

Then, I was a very *good listener*, *very attentive*, the teachers often wrote on my report card. I always had a follow-up question.

"Who's Billy Barnes?" I asked.

"Who is *Billy Barnes*?" you said, like I was supposed to know. But I didn't know anyone except the people in my first-grade class. We were kept hidden away from the older kids, safe in our own private wing of the school. "I'm only dancing the Football Tango with him tomorrow."

"What's the Football Tango?" I asked.

"Just some dance the teachers made up to celebrate Thanksgiving," you said. "I don't really get it. But who cares? That's not the point."

The point was, you were in fourth grade and he was in fifth, and you shouldn't have been partners, but you were paired up anyway. You were the same exact height. It's fate, you said. And it was—the next morning, it happened. You dressed up as a cheerleader and he dressed up as a football player and you tangoed across the gym and he whispered something nice about your hair and that was that. You were in love.

"What did he say about your hair?" I asked.

I was starting to learn that I did not have the right kind of hair. It was nothing like yours, which dried straight out of the shower. Mine was curly, hard to control, like one of those evil cartoon trees that pull people in with their branches when they get too close. That's what Rick Stevenson said on the bus, anyway, just before he told me all about his chinchilla at home, the one that had recently started to eat its own babies.

"I don't know," you said. "Billy didn't specify."

After the dance, you started talking to me about Billy all of the time at night. But you never spoke to him at school.

"What would I even say?" you wondered.

I was surprised you'd ask me—what did I know about speaking to boys then? I could hardly even speak to my own grandmother and grandfather when they sat on our couch during Christmas. I would quietly pick at the hem of my dress, while you asked them questions about their old coal stove and all the milk that used to arrive at their doorstep in bottles. You accepted their gifts with an enthusiasm I couldn't fake. "Thank you so much for the Make-Your-Own-Bubble-Gum kit," you said to Grandma like you meant it, and I was in disbelief. Were we actually excited about making our own bubble gum? I couldn't tell. You were so good—a natural, Dad said once, after we watched you be Peter Pan in *Peter Pan*.

But talking to Billy was not as easy for you.

"Billy's in fifth grade," you said. "And he's going to be a famous basketball player one day. That's what all the teachers say."

So you just watched him from afar, paid close attention to him at recess. Collected information to bring back to me each night. Listed off all the things Billy liked: Pepperoni pizza. The Chicago Bulls. Praying mantises. And his dad, who had recently broken his neck.

"It's really tragic," you said. Then you told the story as if you had been at Bill's Tree and Garden when Billy's dad fell off the ladder. "He must have fallen twenty feet through the air, Sally! It was crazy! He cracked his spine in two places."

"Is he going to die?" I asked.

I couldn't imagine someone breaking their neck and not dying. I imagined Billy's father's neck, bent at a right angle.

"No," you said. "He'll be fine. But still. It's really scary. I mean, who knew being a florist was so dangerous?"

I remember you sounded proud for some reason, like you had broken your own neck.

**Y**ou told me so much about Billy that by the time I actually saw him, it felt surreal. We stepped out of Dad's car and onto the parking lot of Bill's Tree and Garden, and you clutched my arm like you did whenever we saw a fox in the woods.

"It's Billy Barnes," you whispered.

We knew foxes lived here, but we were always surprised to see one in our yard. It was Connecticut. It was the suburbs. We lived one street away from a Dunkin' Donuts. We never expected to be so lucky, to be in the right place at the right time. In the same parking lot where Billy was moving small white trees out of a van.

Dad went inside to get marigolds for the mailbox, but we stood quietly by the entrance. We plucked petals off a nearby rosebush, pretended like we weren't watching him, but we were, of course. We

were studying him very closely, though now it's hard to remember much about the moment. All I can picture is his hair, so thick and brown, like it was made of plastic. Like he was one of my Fisher-Price toys.

"What are you still doing out here, girls?" Dad said when he returned with two pots of gold flowers. The moment was over.

"Nothing," you said, but we both knew we were guilty of something. We stuffed the red petals into our pockets before Dad could see, and you promised me it wasn't stealing because the petals would grow back bigger and brighter, like the worms we sometimes cut in the woods. When Dad started driving, you pulled a petal out of your pocket and started running it along your bottom lip.

"It's so soft," you said, handing it to me. "Feel."

I pressed the rose petal to my lip and felt its softness and that was that.

**T**alking about Billy became part of the nightly ritual. Like a prayer before bed. Every night that year, we turned off the lights and I pulled down the window shade and you told me about how he gave you a pencil for no reason in the hallway. Ate a bumblebee at recess, also for no reason. Brought in carnations for the entire school. For Valentine's Day.

"Isn't that nice?" you asked.

"Isn't his dad a florist?" I asked.

Some nights, we wondered about the things we didn't know, things we could never know about Billy. What would it feel like to kiss him, and do you think he'd be a good husband?

Of course, we decided.

"I bet he'll take his daughters to the Grand Canyon," you said.

"He'll give them whole dollars when they lose their teeth," I said. "Not like Dad."

In the morning, we woke up and we were always disappointed by

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 the clothes we had laid out the night before. We changed our minds about what to wear, which you said we were allowed to do, and yet I felt bad for the rejected clothes all during breakfast, sometimes apologized to them before we ran to the bus. When you heard me doing this, you laughed. "Sally, they're just shoes!" you said. "It's just a shirt!" But I couldn't stop feeling that they were more than that, that everything was secretly alive, which was why I also said goodbye to the radiators before we left.

**A**fter his dad broke his neck, Billy became famous for doing stupid things, too, like putting a carrot in the pencil sharpener before lunch and jumping off the roof after school.

"Who dares me to jump off this roof?" Billy shouted down to us all on the blacktop.

Nobody did. Not even Rick Stevenson, who had spent all of lunch-time crushing his SweetARTS into a fine powder and then snorting them up his nose. Rick just looked concerned.

"It's too high!" Rick shouted. Then he turned to us. "Billy's going to die."

We looked up at Billy, high on the roof like the American flag. For the first time in his life, Rick seemed right. Billy was going to die. You and I exchanged a secret glance.

"Billy is so dumb," you said to me, but you smiled as you said it, as if it were the best thing a boy could be.

The fall was quick and hard. We ran to Billy, but we were all too afraid to touch him. On the pavement, unconscious, Billy didn't look like Billy at all. He was too still, and it made no sense, because whenever you talked about Billy, he was always moving, like a car that never shut off. But the longer I stood above him, the more unfamiliar he became. Gave me the same feeling I got when I saw Grandpa at his wake. He looked like a total stranger in his casket, stiff and covered in someone else's makeup.

"Somebody help him!" you shouted.

I ran for help. But the whole time down the hallway, I was confused. *If we don't know Billy by this point*, I thought, *who could we ever know?* And then I got the nurse, who was, you said, not really a nurse.

"What is she then?" I asked you.

We watched her wipe the blood off Billy's arms and legs.

"She's just Priscilla Mountain's mom," you said.

We stood on the pavement for a long time after that, like two beads strung on the chain of Billy's life.

**B**illy broke his leg in two places, which made him a celebrity at school. When he returned from the hospital, everybody lined up to sign his cast, even the teachers. Some girls drew pink hearts next to their name, and some girls, like Priscilla, wrote their phone numbers on his kneecap.

"Why did you *do* that?" you said to Priscilla, not like you were mad, but like maybe you should have done something like that.

"I like him," Priscilla said, and shrugged as if it were no big deal, and yet it annoyed me for the same reason it annoyed me that she was sleeping over. Put her sleeping bag between our beds and a framed picture of her parents on our nightstand and talked about Billy as if he belonged to her.

"We liked Billy way before he broke his leg," I said.

"Sally!" you said.

It felt important—to have loved Billy before he jumped off the roof. To have danced the Football Tango with him way back when. But Priscilla seemed skeptical.

"You like Billy?" Priscilla asked. "You never talk about him."

Now it was your turn to shrug. "He's okay," you said.

You were actually quite shy when you were in fourth grade, something I did not realize at the time, since you were never shy around me. In our room, at night, you were always most yourself.

"I feel like I can say anything to you," you confessed to me after Priscilla left.

But Billy was too popular to talk to, you said. And once his leg healed, Billy was always surrounded by boys, always playing games in the side yard at recess. Football. Soccer. Then basketball. Billy didn't care about talking to girls. Billy didn't care about anything but the Chicago Bulls and how many pull-ups people did during gym class. And dogs. Billy loved dogs. Brought his father's service dog in once for show-and-tell and we followed him through the halls all day. Billy never looked back at us, only bent down to ruffle his dog's head. A yellow Lab.

You tried to get his attention in other ways. At the end of the year, you auditioned for the Disney Spectacular. You dressed up as Annie Oakley for our school's Famous Women Throughout History convention at the end of the year. When all the girls in our school came as famous princesses or queens, you put on your cowboy hat and put a plastic gun in your pocket, because we could do things like that back then. We went to the cafeteria, where our teachers passed out buttons that said "Push Me," and you came alive when people pushed your button. You twirled your gun and delivered your best western twang. Everybody clapped, except Billy. Billy reached out for your plastic gun, turned it over and over, as if he were an antique dealer, appraising it.

Meanwhile, I was dressed in black, all the way on the other side of the cafeteria. People looked at my button, which for some reason said, "Plush me" instead of "Push Me." Boys from my class circled around and Rick Stevenson said, "Ha, Ha. Plush Me. Sally wants to get plushed." I stood straight and thin lipped with one hand on one hip. I felt severe in my bonnet. I didn't know what getting *plushed* was, but I knew I didn't ever want it to happen to me. I knew it would never have happened to Annie Oakley. *She*, I thought, *got a gun*.

"So, what are you?" Billy asked.

During all of our nightly conversations, it had never occurred to me that I might actually speak to Billy one day. I had loved Billy the way I loved Hawaii or Paris, two places we talked about visiting at night, but knew we'd never see because Dad claimed he was too tall to fit in an airplane for that long. So we put up posters of Paris in our

room and talked about the kind of croissants we would eat at the base of the Eiffel Tower and that felt like enough.

But here was Billy, standing before me, waiting for a response.

"I'm Florence Nightingale," I finally said.

Mom's idea, which sounded like a good one when she suggested it, but stupid as soon as Billy said, "Is that some kind of a flower?"

"No. She was a famous nurse," I said. "In the Crimean War."

I had a long speech prepared, about how heroic she had been, how her great skill was careful observation. I was even going to mime stitching someone's wound. But Billy said, "Sorry, never heard of it," and then walked off with his friends to the water fountain. He dipped his head low enough to get his hair wet, which must have felt nice. It was mid-July. Too hot to still be in school, in the gym, sweating underneath this nurse's robe, which was really just your old choir uniform. It was a relief when Billy pushed open the double doors on his way out and let in the cool breeze.

I wouldn't see Billy again for years. He went to middle school, and then, a year after, you left to be with him. That's what it felt like. Like I had been left behind in elementary school. Each day, I looked forward to getting home and hearing your updates on Billy.

But some nights, you wouldn't talk much. Some nights, you would put on your headphones and hunch over your homework, and say, "Shhh" whenever I tried to speak. But you always answered me if I asked about Billy. You couldn't resist telling me about your chance encounters with him in the lunch line or how he let you dissect his owl pellet at the science fair or how he held the door for you on the last day of seventh grade.

"He didn't even have to," you said. "I was all the way on the other side of the hallway."

But Billy stood at the door, waiting for you in a suit and tie, which was what the boys had to wear on game days in middle school. It made Billy look older, you said. Taller. It made you think that what Mom had

said was right: you girls will be treated with more respect when you dress like you deserve it. Because Billy wore white shirts and ties on game days and then walked down the hallways and the teachers high-fived him. "Hey, great job at the game last night," they said. "Way to take down Dalton." He walked down the hallways as if he owned them, and maybe he did. Maybe that's why he was always holding doors for people.

"He just watched me walk down the empty hallway," you said. "It felt like it took forever to get there."

"That's so awkward," I said. "What did you say?"

"I said, Hey thanks. And he said, No sweat."

And then you walked under his arm and in that moment, you felt something pass through you. You felt truly seen by Billy for maybe the first time in your life.

"Do you guys have a game today?" you asked. A stupid question, you knew. Clearly, he had a game.

"Yeah," he said, and, in your reports, that was all he ever seemed to say. Yeah. No. Maybe. I don't know. He didn't seem to need to speak. Billy's body spoke for him. Even I could hear it, from afar, from our bedroom.

"Does this mean he likes you?" I asked.

"No," you said. "Billy doesn't like anybody."

The only thing Billy cared about in middle school was basketball. He even slept with his basketball some nights, you told me once. At a certain point, I stopped wondering how you knew things about Billy and just processed what you were telling me as fact.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he's got to learn to love it," you said. "That's what his dad said."

I never had much to report to you at night, except my own academic achievements. The boys of fifth grade did not hold doors for me. They didn't even hold doors for themselves. Rick Stevenson liked to

kick doors open with one foot, so hard it always slammed back in his face and made him laugh. The boys I knew did most things with a kind of violence then, even the nice ones like Peter Heart, who tried to flirt with me on the way back from Mystic Seaport by pretending I had been mutilated in a terrible car accident.

"Sally, you're in terrible pain," Peter said, leaning over me. "Now let me put this healing Band-Aid on you."

He put it directly on my lips. Pressed it down firmly. And I thought for a moment that he might kiss me—I had hoped he might kiss me—but then he ripped the Band-Aid right off.

"You have another wound," you said. "A terrible gaping wound on your leg. I think we're going to have to cut it off."

It was all very weird, I told you.

"Oh, it's not that weird," you said. "It just means he likes you."

You were right. A few weeks later, Peter sent me a note in English, asking me to be his girlfriend.

"And what did you say?" you asked.

I said yes, of course. But then we didn't speak for months. Not until I won the fifth-grade spelling bee. I spelled E-L-E-C-T-R-O-N, which upset Peter, because he always won. "Do you even know what an electron is?" Peter asked, and I didn't. I looked it up in the encyclopedia later that night, after everyone fell asleep. I read the entry twice, but still, I didn't understand. What was a subatomic particle of negative electricity?

"Huh?" you said, when I woke you up. "What are you talking about?"

I flopped onto my bed.

"I don't even know what an electron is!" I confessed. "I'm a fraud."

"Oh my God, Sally," you said. "Nobody knows what an electron is."

And besides, you said, that wasn't the point of the spelling bee—the point was to spell the word and that's what you did and that's why they gave you an ice-cream cone and that's why they took a picture of you for the newspaper and everybody who sees it will be like, Sally Holt! Wow. She's so smart.

And you were right. That was what people said after the spelling bee. But it never sounded the way it sounded when you said it. When Rick Stevenson said it at the bus stop, he made it sound like the worst thing about me. When Mom said it, she sounded concerned, like maybe this was the reason I was often alone, in some corner, with a book. And when Grandma said it, it was always just after she called you beautiful.

"You're so beautiful, Kathy," Grandma said. "You could be an anchorwoman one day!"

And then she turned to me. How desperate I must have looked, standing next to you, waiting for my compliment.

"And you, little Sally," she said. "You're so smart and quiet and well-behaved. I bet you'd make a great nun someday."

I froze. Why would Grandma say this to me? Why would I want to be a nun? Couldn't she tell that all I wanted, then, was to be you? I wanted to be older and pierce my ears and grow my hair down to my waist. But Mom wouldn't allow it. Mom dragged me every six weeks to get a trim, long after she stopped dragging you.

"Get in the car," Mom said.

On the way, Mom assured me that hair grew longer the more we cut it, and though this did not seem possible to me, I sat in the chair and trusted in Mom's magic and was disappointed when I looked in the mirror after to find my hair shorter, sitting just above my shoulders like some large brown triangle. It made me feel like a nun.

"But what if I don't want to be a nun?" I asked you later that night.

"Why would you have to be a nun?" you asked.

Nuns didn't get a choice; that's what Valerie Mitt said at CCD class. Her aunt didn't have a choice. Her aunt was just sitting on some park bench, reading her book, minding her business, when God spoke to her. Called her to worship the Lord. And so she became a nun.

For years after Grandma's comment, I worried about God finding me like that, too. Whenever we were out in public, walking to the

car or through the mall, I made sure to stay three steps behind you, so God would choose you first.

And when you got to high school, you were chosen. Chosen to be Annie in *Annie*. To be Cinderella in *Cinderella*. To be lead soprano in the women's choir. To sing the National Anthem before the boy's high school basketball game, and you were only a sophomore. I couldn't believe it.

"You're going to have to sing in front of Billy?" I asked.

You refused to act like it was a big deal. "Calm down," you said. "Everyone in the choir gets asked eventually."

Then, in the back seat of the car, you practiced your breathing.

"But why do you have to practice breathing?" I asked. "You already know how."

"There are right ways and wrong ways to breathe," you said. Mr. Fiske, your choir teacher, had taught you how to sing from your belly, how to breathe and keep your voice steady, how to think of yourself as deserving of opportunity. "Especially while you sing."

Walking into the gym felt like walking into an alternate universe, one I had only read about in the newspapers while Mom made breakfast before school. Billy was going to be a star, you read aloud over our pancakes. What made Billy stupid also made him great on the court—Billy had no fear. "That kid could make a three pointer with a bull running right at him," the coach said.

But I was always afraid then. I was nervous for you as you walked to the microphone in the middle of the gym, and Billy and the boys all stood up alongside their bench. Even though there was no need to be—you took the mic and sang the National Anthem the way you had so many times before in the shower, except in the gym, it sounded extra beautiful. Maybe it was the microphone or maybe it was the big expanse of the room or maybe it was knowing that Billy was watching you sing, admiring you the way I was admiring you.